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Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Feb., 1986), pp. 30-34
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/817877
Accessed: 23-01-2016 06:08 UTC

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A New Contributor

# Mythological Messages in "The A-Team"

Neil Anderson

Television, through its constant repetition of story and visual patterns, is the most powerful purveyor of myth in North America. Classic mythical characters and plots appear regularly in programming on news, and in commercials. The effects of experiencing these myths is largely the same as it was for the ancients: people, through stories of their heroes and heroines, realize who they are and what is important in life. Myths can be used to reaffirm values and lifestyles that keep a society strong. The ancient Greeks used myths to promote aggressive and adventuresome behavior that created a great empire; the Innuit use theirs to promote their society's vital harmony with and respect for Nature. A society's collective stories can be seen to have propagandistic functions, and if we see TV's stories as mythic, they may go beyond entertainment to become an acculturating force.

Many of the myths we have inherited from Western Europe, and which seem more common in our literature than those of Native North American cultures, revolve around violence and the acquisition of power. Some of TV's mythic stories reveal remarkable attitudes towards violence and power in today's world.

Among these retellings of myth on television is the very popular "The A-Team," interesting in the way it speaks and what it says. The 1983–1984 Nielsen rating listed the show in the number three position with a 24.0 rating, meaning an average weekly audience of 48 million people. Each week the show reaffirms the maverick and vigilante stance that frontier America was based on and which still seems romantically attractive to Americans frustrated by a world where issues refuse to be seen as black and white and where they are under attack as villainous in ways they have been taught to despise. It also makes some hawkish statements about the language of violence in a time when violence is a very contentious issue.

"The A-Team's" messages also make it easier for press agents to present American foreign policy as a continuation of the heroism of the Lone Ranger, i. e., an unsanctioned (unofficial) agent of freedom and goodness in a wild and dangerous environment.

## Myth and Fate

An examination of the mythic aspects of the show reveal these ideas more clearly. The A-Team's genesis is mythic in that it was formed by fate, as are all great religious or mythic groups. The members were trained as Special Forces soldiers and distinguished themselves in Viet Nam. After being unjustly accused and imprisoned by the military, the Team escaped and became fugitive but was still moral within its own schema.

## Myth and Mavericks

This moral maverick stance is a standard one for American heroes who must make their own morality. Classic examples go back to the American revolution, where British subjects rejected the morality of their rulers' tax system; John Wayne exemplifies this hero in several moves; and Spiderman and the Lone Ranger also operate as mavericks, as do David Carradine in "Kung Fu" and David Janssen in "The Fugitive." Others who exhibit this stance are Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Richard Boone in "Have Gun, Will Travel," "The Incredible Hulk," "Mannix," "Barnaby Jones,"



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"The Dukes of Hazzard" and James Garner in "Maverick" and "The Rockford Files." Each hero is forced into a career as a vigilante soldier of fortune and altruistic champion of underdogs. Just as Americans have seen these heroes operating in their literature for many years, so they can come to see themselves as a maverick nation working for enslaved countries.

The plots are a continual replay of those of Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* and its Hollywood remake, *The Magnificent Seven.* For altruistic reasons, professional soldiers defend peasants against corrupt terrorists. This motif becomes more interesting when compared to President Reagan's reasons for the military invasion of Grenada and the accompanying news reports villifying "Commie" arms caches.

"The A-Team's" most direct television ancestor is "Mission Impossible" wherein a group of highly specialized American professionals took on seemingly impossible odds to foil the efforts of maniacal rulers or spies. This group had both men and women, was deadly serious, and always employed high-tech equipment, though not always weapons, to achieve its goals. While "The A-Team" borrows much from "Mission Impossible," specifically in the repeated motif of an unofficial group working a clandestine operation against anti-American forces, there are significant differences, most obviously in their respective uses of violence. Where the "Mission Impossible" team tried to work through non-violent trickery whenever possible, the A-Team invites violent confrontation, and this has become the obligatory scene in each episode.

**Myth as American Identity**

The Team's four men make up four parts of one mythical American identity: Hannibal, a white, competent leader; Murdock, a distracted but talented worker; Face, a materialistic, flashy but effective white collar worker; and B. A. Baracus, an eccentric representative of lower-class visible minorities. Together they are an Eighties cross-section of the American public. A closer look at the individual members of the Team clarifies the connection between American mythology, "The A-Team," and the application of American military aid.

Hannibal, the smiling blonde leader of the Team, is a symbol descended from the great American heroes, several of whom moved from soldier to president. His strongest visual connection is to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The stogie he constantly clenches in his sparkling smile is reminiscent of photos of FDR (though his willingness to stand bare-headed in the face of enemy fire is more reminiscent of General George Patton). All were masterminds with contingency plans. Hannibal's tag line is "I love it when a plan comes together."

'Because he is an older man with a sunny outlook, a slight paunch, and a heavy walk, Hannibal is not a typically youthful superhero, but he bears a distinct resemblance to Ronald Reagan. He often works in movies (as a cover), similar to Reagan's early career. He often appears to prospective clients in disguise to avoid being trapped by MPs, the disguise usually involving facial hair which is removed, *on camera,* after verification of the clients as genuine sufferers. Facial hair is villainous in most American myths. To quote George Carlin, "Stalin wore a beard, Gabby Hayes had *whiskers.*" So Hannibal's unmasking makes him a more clean-cut American—from shady character to Reagan-clean.

The mythical connection between FDR, Hannibal, and Reagan is important: FDR defeated the Depression and the Nazis; Hannibal can handle all sorts of villains with ease; perhaps Reagan will control the economy and the current anti-American forces.

Face is a symbol of the bourgeois junior executive. His name implies a facade or phoniness, and his behavior bears this out—he is glossy, uses his face as a mask, lies to achieve, and is after women and material goods. He can, however, be tough. Face's unique talent is impersonations and commandeering equipment for which he has a pragmatic morality. Lying, thievery, extortion, and coercion are his stock-in-trade because the end justifies the means.

Each of the three subordinate Team members is important because his characterization provides a figure that the variety of TV viewers can identify with; Face is a key character because he is the link between the normal middle-class American viewer and the unsanctioned behavior presented in the stories. Because viewers see someone looking like *themselves* doing the unusual things, it may be easier to accept the actions as valid.

Murdock is a multi-faceted symbol, the Great American Crazy, exhibiting wild extremes of schizophrenia, paranoia, and manic depression.



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His impressions of movie heroes are fascinating and significant to the series' mythic connections in that they remind us, and him, of the role-playing nature of the show. Murdock often champions the causes of absurd but harmless items (golf balls, plants, cockroaches, pecans, etc.) which can be seen as a humorous comment on the underdog the A-Team is currently protecting. Murdock's talent is his ability to fly anything, and he seems to be high at all times. He is the link between the series and audience members who see themselves as brilliant but unappreciated.

B. A. Baracas is the most interesting of the characters, both inside and outside the series. B. A. can best be understood as a symbolic blend of the most common American minorities: he is black in features, has an Indian haircut and feathered earrings, and wears both the Christian Cross and the Star of David in his several pounds of gold jewelry. His earrings, excessive rings and necklaces might make him seem effeminate, but he is not. His total lack of interest in women compared to Face's mania only adds to his being androgynous, so he is very much a hero of the Eighties. His talent is brawn and expert mechanical skills.[1]

B. A. is tough on villains but has a heart of gold for underdogs, especially children. In fact, B. A. is childish in much of his behavior—he drinks milk, has great rapport with children, and is afraid to fly. This last characteristic is especially interesting when compared to the Billy-Bishop style of Murdock, who loves to fly anything. B. A. and Murdock often bicker childishly and seem to be natural enemies, practicality vs. frivolity. B. A.'s tough tag line is "Move it! Suckah!" and his link to the TV audience is much more complex and far-reaching than that of the other Team members. Because he embodies much more than one minority, he has transcended a one-to-one socio-economic correlation to become a symbol of American integrity and determination.

In a most interesting analysis of the movie version of *Journey to the Center of the Earth,* Harold Schechter in *The New Gods: Psyche and Symbol in Popular Art* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980) presents the four heroes as parts of one psyche corresponding to the four parts of the Jungian quaternity: the masculine Sensation and Thinking and the feminine Feeling and Intuition. In working together, these four characters create one balanced and successful unit. Likewise, the four A-Team members may be seen as successful because each supplies an essential ingredient of the balanced quaternity. Hannibal is clearly Thinking and Face most likely Sensation. How B. A. and Murdock share Feeling and Intuition may be debatable, but the motif fits best when B. A.'s jurisdiction is Feeling (he seems to express the most empathy for the victims) and Murdock with that traditionally feminine trait, Intuition.

Just as "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" presented a group of unrelated people forming a family nucleus, the Eighties' attitude toward the temporary or casual family is also manifested in the paternal Hannibal, the adolescent Face, and the childish Murdock and B. A. If the Team is a microcosm of American society, this loose family may be analogous to America as a team of people working together as one family group.[2]

**Myth as Propaganda**

The A-Team can be seen as excellent American propaganda because it reaffirms the purpose of the Bill of Rights: people have a right to pursue happiness in their own ways and to fight to preserve those rights. It presents a constant good vs. evil dialectic: the good people are proletarian, clean-living, often transient or newcomer workers subjugated by the villains, the latter usually corrupt capitalists, ugly red-necks often using the local government, status quo, or fear to justify their actions. The villain is often one man with henchmen, allowing viewers to focus their hate on one character.[3]

Once this dialectic has been established, the vigilante A-Team enters and turns evil against itself, i. e., often manipulating the villains into self-undoing through their own greed and violence. The Team leaves the villains in the custody of the underdogs to be collected by the proper authorities. The message is that the system still works and the powers-that-be are good, but some lapses will occur that the A-Team must correct. These vigilante actions, necessary if the system is corrupt, fade when the power again becomes honorable.[4]

This motif may be viewed as analogous to the American Presidency of the last decade: it was a corrupt system during Nixon and Watergate, an ineffectual system with Carter's failure to rescue the American hostages in Iran, and then an ordered and positive system led by Reagan.

"The A-Team's" field of battle is usually rural, even though most of the American population is



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urban. Because the American self-concept is strongly tied to the Wild West myth, a rural theatre connects more directly with the concepts of America using its military strength to help underdeveloped (read *frontier*) countries.

In one episode the Team defends a group of pacifists from local rednecks. One line illustrates these ideas and is spoken by a gun-toting Hannibal when criticized by the pacifist leader: "Let us do the job but don't tell us how to do it."

Another exchange between the Pacifist leader and Hannibal expresses tolerance of both pacifism and violence:

> Pacifist leader: "Thank you for understanding our position, Colonel."
> Hannibal: "My pleasure. Anyway, we may need some of your understanding later on."

Still another statement from Hannibal (to Face) helps to explain the role of the soldier in the pacifists' struggles:

> People have many and varied ideas. It is the soldier's job to ensure their freedom of thought.

The last (Hannibal to pacifist leader) underlines this attitude:

> Did you ever stop to think where people like you would be without people like us?

The last two statements are the essence of the pattern of American military aid since Korea.

The unchanging "A-Team" plot formulae follow recent American military and political history as can be seen in this figure.

1. The A-Team has a violent introduction to the conflict at the moment the underdogs are sustaining torture, ridicule, etc.
2. The A-Team immediately goes into action and is defeated or withdraws in the first conflict but remains unhurt and able to regroup and rearm—almost as though to draw the enemy into home territory and create over-confidence in the villains.
3. The anticipated attack is prepared for by careful arming of the area needing defense—especially a prodigious and ritualistic modification of a vehicle by B. A., where much plate metal is cut to size and placed on the vehicle-of-the-week to turn it into an armored-tank surrogate. The arms are usually fashioned from scraps using American know-how and hi-tech resources.
4. The villains charge straight into the trap and are blown hither and yon. There is much highly visual and ritualistic destruction of the villains' vehicles by the heroes' armored vehicle. (The villains, however, are never shot or blown up. This may be to assuage the critics of TV violence but further enhances the mythic talents of the Team because they are able to overpower without killing.)
5. The A-Team is wanted by the authorities and so must leave the villains in the custody of their former victims—poetic justice—for collection, while its quest for peasant freedom is continued elsewhere.

This formula is good fiction, and the ups and downs fit well into television commercial breaks, but it also fits the ups and downs of the American self-concept in the sixties and seventies. The ignominy of Vietnam and the further ignominy of the failure to free the American hostages in Iran (1 and 2 above) were then followed by the invasion of Grenada and Reagan promising that America would no longer take abuse (3 and 4 above).

In the case of "The A-Team," TV is not only a powerful purveyor of myth through its re-working of hero and plot motifs but is powerfully reaffirming a positive American self-concept. It's possible to see the main characters and events of each episode as a continuation of this attitude. The subjugated proles are the vulnerable and innocent third-world peasants in Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Lebanon, etc. The rednecks are violent Communists or terrorists interested in promoting the status quo of the powerful two percent in the third-world countries. The A-Team is the *American Team* of clean-cut leaders, slick middle class, slightly crazy but talented workers, and right-thinking minorities who, working *together,* purposefully liberate underdogs so they can concentrate on fulfilling the American Constitution: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

## Notes

1. Mr. T's persona has penetrated far beyond the series, and he is becoming an interesting American hero. He has worked hard to lose the negative image as the weird maniac in *Rocky III* and has mounted a prodigious public relations campaign to build an image as strange-looking but virtuous, e. g., decorating the White House for Christmas and appearing in a wire-service photo as Santa Claus with Nancy Reagan sitting on his lap. His toughness has been used in jewelry ads, an anti-drug television commercial, and a car wax commercial where he ripped off a car. Mr. T's character is the most common of all "The A-Team" characters in the doll market, and he has a Saturday morning animated bad vs. good show followed by the real Mr. T moralizing about individuality and integrity. This is also evident on



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"The A-Team" as when B. A. said to a young boy, "When you tell the truth, Ole, you got to tell it all."

This mythic persona and its emphasis on tough integrity has also permeated the toy market in the form of watches, toys, etc., in the form of a breakfast cereal in the shape of *T*s, and in the feature film *DC Cab*, where he portrayed a moralistic character like B. A. (After ejecting a hooker from his cab for performing fellatio in the back seat, he tried to lessen slum children's attraction for a drug pusher. Finally, he was a key element in the *team* effort that made a success of the struggling company.)

2. The family doesn't seem to have room for sisters. Two actresses have been tried as members of the Team, but neither has been able to become more than incidental to the action. This may be because of the macho nature of the conflicts and the fact that the audience is largely preteen males who are not ready for any psychic inclusion of feminine behaviour patterns. When women do figure in the stories, it is often in a patronizing context where they either mess up Hannibal's plans or need to be rescued from the current villains, or both. Women also clutter the plots because there can be no love-life for soldiers of the cross, i. e., the heroes' cause is too important for such trivial thoughts as romance. B. A. expresses this when he rejects a preacher's daughter to stay with the Team.

In addition, the Jungian concept of the feminine tends to suggest understanding and compromise as part of a solution, and compromise just isn't part of the Team's vocabulary—its masculine morality is too rigid for that.

3. Because the TV audience, like the audiences of ancient myths, wants a short story with a simple message, the villains have a head man who the viewer can easily identify and hate. This is much preferred to the truth, which is usually that actions are a result of a committee of people operating in a corrupt environment. TV news tends to process the stories in the same manner, shortening stories and identifying one or two rather than many villains. So rather than seeing the whole Islamic system as opposed to American foreign policy we are presented with the Ayatollah Khomeini. Similarly, commercials ignore the complexities of having good social skills and tell us that popularity depends on mouthwash, toothpaste, or losing the ring around our collars. This is not unique to TV, as can be seen by the treatment in the Western newsreels of Mussolini or Hitler. The myths simplify issues for easy assimilation, and the tradition is continued on TV.

4. Steven J. Cannell, the creator of "The A-Team," had a previous television hit in "The Greatest American Hero," which also demonstrated a distinct awareness of the aspects of myth and heroism. In "The Greatest American Hero," Tom is chosen by extraterrestrials rather than choosing to be a hero. The vehicle of his superpowers is a magic suit, a talisman like the Sword of Thundarr or Excalibur for Arthur.

Tom feels uncomfortable as a hero and is afraid his powers may lead to harm rather than good, especially in an episode where he almost kills a by-stander and then refuses to wear the suit for fear of doing further harm. His faith is restored when he meets his own hero: the actor who played the Lone Ranger. This man has also come to accept the role of a hero as lonely, dangerous, but necessary. This attitude of the heroes' *noblesse oblige* comes through both in "The A-Team" episodes and connects to the American attitude toward helping nations under siege; e. g., giving military aid to promote democracy in Vietnam, El Salvador, Lebanon, and Grenada.

The team concept was also key in "The Greatest American Hero." The suit needed two people to make it work: Bill, the FBI man, to guide Tom, the hero. Bill had the A-Team attitude that there were conspirators everywhere doing un-American things and that force had to be used to stop them. Tom tempered Bill's red-necked paranoia with intellect and compassion and tried to do things in a more amicable way. The result was often a stand-off, where both attitudes—aggression and cunning—had to compromise and cooperate for success.

Like "The A-Team," "The Greatest American Hero" works through high-technology applied to solving problems. The difference is that Tom didn't really know how to use his high-tech suit and stumbled onto new powers, whereas the A-Team seems completely in command of machinery and uses it without hesitation. "The A-Team" demystifies hi-tech but lacks the humility expressed by "The Greatest American Hero," i. e., it doesn't show the same respect for weaponry and its destructive potential. This movement tends to match the general American mood shift from dove to hawk, liberal to conservative, that has occurred over the last two decades.

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